

Time of change?

Although the government has been taking steps in the right direction, it needs to take giant strides if we are to reach a point of real sustainability. **Mike Childs**, senior campaigner for Friends of the Earth, takes a look at waste policy this year and the challenges we face in 2003

There have been important developments in waste policy in 2002. Of these, the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit Report has been the most significant. Starting at the Waste Summit in November 2001 and much delayed, it finally emerged in November. In the strange new world of this government, the powers that be have said they will respond to the Cabinet Office report. Margaret Beckett, who chaired the Strategy Unit study, will lead the response. Ever wonder why things never seem to get delivered?

The Strategy Unit report showed that the government doesn't want to top the league table for resource use and recycling, instead plumping for a mid-table position in the EU recycling league. Also, even though £100 million for recycling is welcome, it is debatable whether it is enough, especially if the good recommendations made in the report on waste minimisation are to be implemented. I think the Strategy Unit really tried but were prevented by the Treasury from being more ambitious. The lack of action to tackle the growth of incineration was particularly poor.

On the same day that the Strategy Unit report was released, the Chancellor made his pre-budget speech, in which he announced the reform of the landfill tax credit scheme – for too long money has been squandered under this scheme. We would have liked to see the increase in the landfill tax take effect earlier and be for a higher amount, although we remain hopeful that some of the revenue raised will be used to support waste minimisation from households, commerce and industry.

At a European level, the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment directive was finally agreed, after five years of preparation and discussion. Up to the very last minute the UK Government fought against product manufacturers being made financially responsible for the recycling of their own goods. Fortunately the UK lost the key decisions, and the polluter will now have to pay.

Next year is already looking like a busy one. The Doorstep Recycling Bill, which has been championed by Friends of the Earth and the Community Recycling Network, has a real chance of becoming law. It will take significant campaigning work to get this through, starting at a parliamentary rally in London on Wednesday, January 22. If you care about recycling you really do need to come to



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this event, both to hear great speeches and to ensure that MPs get a loud message that the bill is important and must be supported.

The government will also respond to the Strategy Unit report early in 2003, so we will see if they strengthen it or water it down. In addition to this the Waste and Emissions Trading Bill will proceed through Parliament, and if we do not want to give incineration a huge financial boost we will need to work hard to get this amended. And of course, all the English Regions will be producing Regional Waste Strategies.

This really should be a time of change. It would be great if the UK Government produced a resource strategy that aimed to deliver on its Earth Summit promise to maximise resource efficiency. Or if Gordon Brown thought about introducing virgin resource taxes and taxing incineration. Or if for once the government tackled the issue of over-packaging. But don't hold your breath: this government does not really give a damn about the environment. So the public will have to keep letting it know that this is important.

The community sector needs to keep winning contracts, innovating and showing that it can do world class recycling. But it also has to campaign more actively. If we are to win the big political battles of next year Friends of the Earth and CRN must battle together, side by side, starting on January 22.

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